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Three Book Reviews

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Zazan Tleino: Adivinanzas Nahuas de Ayer, Hoy y Siempre

By JOSÉ ANTONIO FLORES FARFÁN. MÉXICO: CIESAS, 2002. 48 pp. ISBN 978-9706830739

La mujer que brillaba aun más que el sol: la leyenda de Lucía Zenteno/ The Woman Who Outshone the Sun: The Legend of Lucía Zenteno

By ROSA ZUBIZARRETA, HARRIET ROHMER, AND DAVID SCHECTER, BASED ON A POEM BY ALEJANDRO MARTÍNEZ. SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.: CHILDREN'S BOOK PRESS, 1991. 32 pp. ISBN 978-0892391264

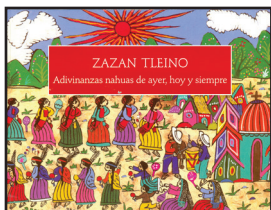
El juego de las piedras antiguas: visita al Museo Nacional de Antropología

By GABRIELA OLMOS AND LEOPOLDO BECERRA. 2ND ED. MÉXICO: ARTES DE MÉXICO, 2010. 69 pp. ISBN 978-6074610505

Introducing indigenous influences into Mexican children's literature can help society gain a better appreciation of traditions integral to Mexico's history. Just as importantly, representations of indigenous culture help Mexican society preserve ancient, pre-European heritage. Through indigenous representations in contemporary children's literature, another method of conceptualizing the world is constructed. This review of three recent children's books considers how their accounts instill a positive view of traditionally ignored, and stigmatized, indigenous cultures.

Careful examination of the collection of riddles and sayings, *Zazan Tleino: Adivinanzas Nahuas de Ayer, Hoy y Siempre*, by José Antonio Flores Farfán, reveals clear appreciation for the value of indigenous culture. Farfán specifies this in the preface to his book, delineating his

aims for continuing an oral tradition of Nahua, or Mexican highlands, people. He describes his initial illiteracy and incompetence with respect to Náhuatl story making, both in explaining and translating, citing this as



a recognition in having prepared this book. Farfán also makes clear his belief in the effectiveness of simple story and riddle-telling as a means of making indigenous culture accessible to a wider public, and its power in instilling pride and love for ancient ways and Nahua indigenous culture.

The best thing about *Zazan Tleino* is that it allows children to learn Náhuatl vocabulary which can be easily

incorporated into everyday life. Farfán's riddles are presented in four languages: Náhuatl, Spanish, English, and French. The first serves as the primary language for the text, thus de-stigmatizing indigenous language and making it an important aspect of mainstream contemporary society, which has only made provisions for "official" languages. Language serves as a crucial glue that promotes and enables the continuance of a culture: Farfán empowers Náhuatl by employing it as the first language of this book, raising it to the level of the other European-origin languages found on this continent. Here is an example of one of the short riddles in this book, with two of the translations:

Náhuatl: Zazan tleino. Matlactin tepatlactli quimomamatimani.

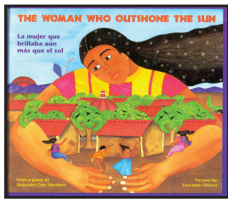
Español: *Diez lozas transparentes, que carga toda la gente.*

English: *All the men. Carry them. Ten by ten.*

Some of the riddles address the events of everyday life, while others are more philosophical. Farfán's book does, however, beg the question: why choose French for the fourth language for these riddles? If truly attempting to spread an appreciation for the indigenous people of this hemisphere, why not select another indigenous tongue, such as the Mixtec or Toltec?

A second children's book, *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun: The Legend of Lucía Zenteno*, based on a poem by Zapotec writer, Alejandro Cruz Martínez, compiled/prepared by Rosalma Zubizarreta, Harriet Rohmer and David

Schecter, and accompanied by the beautiful images of artist Fernando Olivera, is a bilingual book presented in Spanish and English. Its purpose is to promote Martínez's art, and the philosophical conceptions of indigenous culture. The



woman serving as heroine of the tale—Lucía—is depicted as traditionally indigenous, with long, straight black hair, dark brown skin, and dark eyes. She is barefoot and is repeatedly described as being so “amazingly beautiful” (2), that “the river fell in love with her” (6).

The book begins by drawing a parallel between the historical stigmatization of indigenous communities and the stigmatization suffered by the heroine in the story: “Lucía was different from them ... (so) they were afraid of her. They refused to offer their friendship. They called her cruel names” (10). As the community fears her and treats her badly, eventually asking her to leave town, “Lucía continued to walk with her head held high” (12). The story demonstrates the devastating effects that are suffered by a community, or dominant society, when it mistreats the *other*: someone unfamiliar to them. When Lucía leaves, the river (so crucially needed by the people) departs with her.

Once the townspeople suffer, due to the loss of their river—nature—they unite and together go in search of Lucía, to offer her an apology and beg for her return. Lucía—perhaps a symbol of Mother Nature—is not resentful, but instead, compassionate. She says, “I will ask the river to return to you. But just as the river gives water to all who are thirsty, so you must learn to treat everyone with kindness, even those who seem different from you” (24). The book’s lesson, that of treating everyone with kindness and respect, is greater than the mere telling of a traditional children’s story. The lesson embedded in this book is addressed to all of contemporary dominant society: to examine the stigmatization of indigenous groups, or those who look indigenous. The story therefore makes the complex issues of racial and ethnic intolerance accessible to children.

Finally, *El juego de las piedras antiguas*, by Gabriela Olmos and Leopoldo Becerra, written in Spanish. A book often sold at museums and tourist gift shops, seeks not so much to continue indigenous oral traditions, but rather to promote contemporary understanding of ancient,

pre-European cultures. Olmos and Becerra bring to life the beautiful objects in the internationally renowned Mexican National Museum of Archaeology in Mexico City, by comparing the poses, ideas, and games presented by these objects or figures, with similar practices by children in mainstream contemporary society.



The approach by this children’s book brings to wider recognition the diverse indigenous societies that have called the current nation of Mexico home, including the Olmec, Toltec,

Huastec, Maya, Zapotec, and Mexica cultures, and also de-stigmatizes indigenous culture by drawing parallels between indigenous archaeological artifacts, events, and customs, and those practiced today. As the book concludes, the child narrator states: “Ahora pienso que, aunque nuestros ancestros vivieron hace muchísimo tiempo, los comprendo porque ellos eran sólo seres humanos. Tan humanos como yo” (60–63) [*Now I think that, even though our ancestors lived a very long time ago, I understand them because they were only human beings. As human as me*].

In the end, reading children’s books such as *Zazan Tleino*, *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun*, and *El juego de las piedras antiguas*, provides insights, in a subtle and effective manner, for understanding and combating the stigmatization of the indigenous peoples of this continent (and particularly, Mexico). As well, and significantly, they restore and bring appreciation—as equal societies and human beings—to ancient, pre-European cultures. While one may not consider children’s books as a source for the study of Mexican society, these examples represent an excellent offering to restore and open understanding of indigenous cultures stigmatized by contemporary society. Sources like these help reclaim indigenous heritage, culture, and way of life as equally valid as those of Western inheritance, to further deconstruct conceptions of European “civilization” versus indigenous “backwardness.” By embracing both the presence of indigenous people and the many languages they speak, these children’s books both fight prejudice and restore the indigenous communities of Mexico.

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